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ABSTRACT

Mutual distrust and suspicion between individuals from differing cultures often influence behavior in the classroom to the point of blocking learning. This "culture clash" also exists for literacy learning in that, as a national goal, reading has been imposed on certain groups whose cultures are not literate and on groups who, although their cultures are literate, see reading in English as destructive to their culture. Cultures which have long oral traditions include the Black culture, various American Indian cultures, the Chicano culture, and the Puerto Rican culture. In these societies cultural information is largely passed by word of mouth. In an orally based culture reading has little place or may be seen as peripheral to the cultural reward system. To these cultures, school is often seen as the enculturating tool of the dominant society, and reading and literacy, as a major part of "mainstream" cultures, is seen as part of that enculturation. To help overcome the problem, teachers need to be aware of possible clashes in the classroom and examine in depth their own feelings and attitudes toward children who come from cultures other than their own. (HOD)

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CULTURAL DIVERSITY -

A FACTOR IN LEARNING TO READ

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One of the major extensions of the ability to communicate in our society is that of literacy. Learning to read is a major achievement in a child's development, and the ability to read plays a major role in many adults' lives. This is not to say that reading is a major or even favorite pastime in America; it isn't. But the written word does have the central function in our society of being a major transmitter of the culture. Most of us have neither the time nor the money nor the ability to experience many events first hand. We have to do it by reading as we no longer have storytellers who do it by word of mouth, or we do it by watching or listening to the mass media. Also central in our culture are all sorts of forms for drivers' licenses, income taxes, wills, job applications, time payments, loans, leases, mortgages, and contracts of various sorts. These are often couched in "legalese" or semi-legalese which undoubtedly confounds the average reader. But much money can be and has been lost because of not comprehending the "fine print" in these documents. So the ability to decode and comprehend the written word can be of great monetary value, have a survival value in this society, and can also give pleasure and relaxation as well as be instructive.

This is, of course, a rather cursory discussion of what might seem highly self-evident to most teachers who probably spend much more time worrying about their students' reading abilities than about their ability to multiply and divide. However, I would caution perspective. With the best will in the world, how can we help a child learn to read if it plays little or no role in her culture or if it is seen even as hostile to her

culture? Or how can we help if we are hostile, in turn, to the child's culture? Also teachers are often hostile to the child's different language patterns which usually accompany cultural differences. We should not be surprised by these language differences. Robbins Burling notes:

> ...Any important sociological distinction is likely to be reflected in language. We all know that teenagers to members of the older generation tend to speak differently. Women do not speak identically with men. Professional groups develop their own jargon, and so do groups of criminals. Even families often acquire a few unique linguistic symbols, such as words that are used by family members with a special twist of meaning. . . . By our language we define certain people as inside the group, and we leave others out. Language comes to be an accurate map of the sociological divisions of a society. (Burling, 1973, 27)

For example, the social variety called Black English or black ghetto vernacular spoken by poor blacks living in the urban north has "stigmatized" forms in it such as multiple negatives and "reductions" such as <u>boy hat</u> for <u>boy's hat</u>. These forms also are a part of many other lower class groups' speech. But they are often viewed from an ethnocentric viewpoint as "bad" or "wrong." Similarly, even when a child comes to school speaking a language different than English such as a variety of Spanish or an American Indian language, that entire language is often stigmatized by the teacher. How many cases have we heard of Chicano or Puerto Rican children being severely punished in school for using their variety of Spanish? I could detail instance after instance of the same thing happening to Indian children who even used to be put in boarding schools away from their family and tribe!

The mutual distrust and suspicion between individuals from other cultures has been termed cultural clash. Such clash has been well documented in many school situations ranging from urban ghetto schools to

rural schools. It has the potential to arise wherever the participants in a situation come from different cultures, as different cultures are accompanied by different behavioral patterns, both verbal and non-verbal. The patterns tend to be judged from the person's own cultural value system rather than by the standards of the culture of which they are a part. Edward Hall (DeStefano and Fox 1974) has dramatically documented such clash with an example: In black ghetto culture and in some American Indian cultures at least, it is not polite for a child to look an adult in the eye. To do so signals the child is defying authority. Consequently, that child comes to school, and, wanting to please, doesn't look the teacher in the eye. The "mainstream" middle class set of values is used by the teacher in judging this eye contact, resulting all too often in a decision the child is sneaky. "You know, he just won't look you in the eye. He must have a guilty conscience." Estelle Fuchs, in her book Teachers Talk, (1969) documents cultural clash in New York City ghetto schools between Puerto Rican children and "mainstream" teachers. These examples are given to help illustrate the force and pervasiveness of cultural clash.

What can cultural clash do to children? This phenomenon all too often influences behavior in the classroom to the point of blocking learning. We don't learn about the children because we don't like their attitudes, looks, etc., and they don't learn much from us except that the world is largely racist or sexist or whatever. The negative becomes accentuated, and differences tend to be evaluated negatively.

This clash situation can and does exist for literacy learning for more than we probably anticipate. Why, we ask. Doesn't everybody want

to learn to read? Isn't this a national goal? Yes to the goal question but a no to the wanting to learn to read. As a national goal, reading has been imposed on certain groups whose cultures are either not literate [oral is the term often used], or if literate, see reading in English as destructive to their culture.

Let's look at oral cultures first. There are at least several in the United States which have long oral traditions; black culture, various American Indian cultures, and some aspects of Chicano and Puerto Rican culture. Cultural information is largely passed by word of mouth and by doing - children working alongside of their parents or other adults. Cultural information such as the belief and value systems are transmitted far more by speech than by writing. On the other hand, "mainstream" culture is a literary culture; its information is largely transmitted through books and other printed matter.

Black ghetto culture has many of the verbal forms (such as oral epic poetry), found in other oral cultures. Men can gain prestige and status in the community through their ability to toast which is to recite these poems containing stock characters such as the signifying monkey (probably African in origin), John Henry (we only know the song), and Stagolee.

You may hear little boys "playing the dozens" on the playground. It's a type of verbal oneupmanship, of verbal dueling in which one tries to cap another's statement. The boy who can remember the most of these "one-liners" is the winner. Some of my favorite examples are:

> Yo mama sent her picture to the Lonely Hearts Club, and they sent it back and said, "We ain't that lonely!"
>
> Your family is so poor the rats and roaches eat lunch out.
>
> (Kochman, 1970, 159)

There are many other verbal forms which are used in black ghetto culture: for men talking to women and vice versa, for talking to strangers and white people, for preaching, etc. And there are different audience interaction patterns as well. There tends to be much more participation and response in black ghetto audiences than in "mainstream" audiences. Middle class people tend to sit quietly and give non-verbal cues that they're listening. Black ghetto dwellers tend much more to give verbal cues that they approve of or disapprove of what the speaker is saying. All this verbal behavior and speaker-listener interaction is highly developed, codified, and culturally constrained. It's definitely part of the sociolect called Black Fnglish.

In Finland, the national epic, the Kalevala, was up until the late 1800's a collection of oral poems with a distinct metric pattern. These oral tales were told by people called kanteles who would travel from village to village chanting the tales, accompanying themselves with a zither-like instrument. The tales were all memorized as far as the story-line was concerned; the actual wording and use of stock phrases to finish the metric pattern of a line was up to the individual kantele. The better the turn of a phrase, the more witty the kantele, the more famous he or she was. Lonnrot, the man who first collected most of the oral tales and wrote them down, found one woman who knew several hundred with all the twists and turns of the plots which tend to be complex. With literacy coming to Finland, now about 99% literate, the kanteles are no longer to be found as the tales are written down for all to read - and all can read them. The Finns accepted literacy in Finnish which was, until relatively recently for Furope, an oral language, not a written one. With the coming of literacy most of the oral traditions are disappearing.

In the United States many oral traditions have also disappeared with widespread literacy. But several cultures still hold to theirs such as the toasts and other verbal forms in black culture. These remaining oral forms have an ancient history, so ancient as to antedate the Iliad and the Odyssey, originally oral poems which were only later written down after the Greeks invented their alphabet. Such venerable beginnings should indicate to anyone that oral traditions are not inferior to literary ones; they are simply older and different.

In an orally based culture, reading has little place or may be seen as peripheral to the cultural reward system. In other words, you get no special status by being able to read or to read well. Status accrues instead to the proficient "rappers" and toasters, those quick on their feet verbally and who can turn a good phrase. Or other oral cultures may value the faultless recitation from memory of long sagas and rituals. There may even be taboos against writing any rituals down, much like the ban on photographs by some Amish.

The dominant culture in the United States has a literary tradition; black culture and Indian cultures are oral. What does this mean for the motivation to learn to read in a child from one of these cultures? It may mean that there is relatively little as reading is a largely unrewarded activity in her culture. Let me clarify that; many black parents, for example, want their children to learn to read. They hold many of the "mainstream" values including reading. But in the mileau the child lives, there are other signals which essentially communicate a lack of value for reading. Let me illustrate. Labov and Robins (1973) found among black

male adolescents in Harlem an almost total lack of interest in reading, particularly among those who were well integrated into the peer group street subculture. Upon questioning it was found that members of a certain street group didn't have any idea how well each other read. Generally their reading ability was at least several years below grade level, and not one in that group was able to read above the fifth grade level. That meant eighth graders were reading at no more than a fifth grade level. Within the group, status and position were assigned totally independently of reading ability. As a matter of fact, any school success was irrelevant to the street subculture and its set of values.

What does this mean for teachers of children whose peer subculture or even adult culture is either hostile to or ignoring of reading? It means that motivation certainly cannot be stirred merely by saying it's wonderful to learn to read. Why? What do these children get out of it now? How can you motivate a six-year-old by job opportunities when she's eighteen? And another problem: reading is seen within the matrix of the school subculture toward which there may be great hostility by the children and possibly the parents. It's often seen as alien to and alienating from the parent's culture. Labov and Robins' Harlem street groups saw school as hostile and irrelevant to their lives. They tended to associate reading with femininity as the teachers are mostly female, and girls often are able to read better than the boys. So if they read well, they'd look unmasculine. The boys in these groups value intelligence but don't see that connected with reading ability. They also value language ability, but that's oral rather than written. Motivation for school: Let me quote: "...teachers in the city schools have little ability to reward or punish

members of the street culture, or to motivate learning by any means." (Labov and Robins, p. 319) Motivation for reading? Look at that quote again.

The highly unfortunate point is that when these boys grow older, they begin to subscribe to the adult values which do hold more with the "mainstream" value set. But they lack necessary reading skills because of the cultural clash during the developmental reading years. So you can see that cultural clash can be extremely damaging and materially contribute to failure as an adult when value sets shift.

How do we cope with such a clash? Labov and Robins suggest a cultural intermediary in the school, someone the boys can identify with and who also values reading. What else could we do though, if such an intermediary were unavailable? Certainly a realization of the clash is extremely important; the children are not lazy or "bad." They are only subscribing to a set of values which is much more important to them at the time. School must be made less hostile an environment for these children. Perhaps with less hostility, there can be more acceptance of the value of reading or at least a tolerance for it. Obviously cultural clash is a very real and very difficult problem, but one we must deal with if we are to maximize the ability to cummunicate in children.

But what of cultures in which the adults are also hostile to literacy in English? There the problem is compounded. In black culture many of the parents are sympathetic if not extremely positive about literacy, and they speak English as their first language. In the Cherokee culture in Oklahoma for example, the adults are sympathetic to literacy in Cherokee but not in English. Let me explain. Among the Cherokees (Halle 1972), there has long been a literary tradition begun by Sequoya, one of their chiefs who created

an alphabet for the Cherokee language in the early 1800's. It's not at all unusual for an adult Cherokee to teach himself or herself to read. And the children quickly become literate. According to W. Walker who has researched Cherokee literacy, the Cherokee were 90% literate in their own language by the 1830's. By the 1880's, the western Cherokees had a higher literacy rate than the whites in Texas and Arkansas (where the Cherokees were then).

"Since the federal government took over the Cherokee school system in 1898, Cherokees have viewed the school as a white man's institution which Cherokee children are bound by law to attend, but over which their parents have no control. Most Cherokee speakers drop out of school as soon as this is legally possible. While in school, they learn relatively little due to the language barrier and also due to this unfortunate, but accurate, definition of the school as a white man's institution. As a further complication Cherokee parents are well aware that educated children tend to leave the community, either geographically or socially. To them the school threatens the break-up of the family and division of the community, precisely those consequences which no genuinely tribal society can tolerate." (Walker, p. 4)

"It seems clear that the startling decline during the past sixty years of both English and Cherokee literacy in the Cherokee tribe is chiefly the result of the recent scarcity of reading materials in Cherokee, and of the fact that learning to read has become associated with coercive instruction, particularly in the context of an alien and threatening school presided over by English-speaking teachers and controlled by English-speaking superintendents and PTA's which conceive of Cherokee as a 'dying' language and Cherokee school children as 'culturally impoverished' candidates for

rapid and 'inevitable' social assimilation. Indians and whites alike are constantly equating competence in the school with assimilations into the white middle class. . . For the Cherokee community to become literate once again, Cherokees must be convinced that literacy does not imply the death of their society, that education is not a clever device to wean children away from the tribe." (p. 8)

I have already discussed the hostility toward school in the urban slums. School, then, is often seen as the enculturating tool of the dominant society. Reading and literacy is a major part of "mainstream" culture, so is seen as part of that enculturation. But all too often reading failure and difficulties are pinned on physiological or psychological problems, and the cultural input is entirely ignored. [Ethnocentrism again?] How can we talk about decoding problems if the child comes to school perhaps overtly hostile to the idea of learning to read or learning to read English? Where is the initial motivation to learn to read? And if the teacher is hostile to the child's culture, as all too many are, where is that motivation going to come from in school?

Unfortunately at the present time, there are relatively few practical suggestions to offer to help overcome these motivation questions. Little research has been done in this area. Also the cultural hostility is only partly manifested in the school situation; cultural clash occurs 24 hours a day and not just in a school building. As teachers you need to be aware of the possibility of such clash in your classroom and examine in depth your own feelings and attitudes toward the children who come from cultures other than your own. Reading takes place in a cultural setting of which you and your students are a part. That cannot be overlooked.

We must remember that language use is a social act which takes place in a social context. Reading is part of that social act in a social context. If the factors contributed by a social situation with all its cultural constraints are forgotten, a great deal of reading is also forgotten. I've mentioned it's possible reading won't even be learned if the social conditions are not favorable. As teachers we cannot forget the social setting and its influence on teaching and learning reading.

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